

The fairy tale connection in children's stories: Cinderella meets Sleeping Beauty

Bearse, who has worked with students in Grades K-12 as a classroom teacher, poet-in-the-schools, reading specialist, and consultant, is presently a writing specialist at J.P. Kane Magnet School in Lawrence, Massachusetts.

For the past 20 years, as a classroom teacher, poet, and language arts consultant, I have observed children incorporating ideas from books they have read or heard into the writing of their stories. Recently, noted children's author Jane Yolen stated: "Stories lean on stories, art on art. And we who are the tellers and the artists do what has been done for all the centuries of tellings: We thief (or more politely borrow) and then we make it our own" (1991, p. 147).

As I have worked with children, questions about their reading/writing connections similar to those raised by Galda (1984) have recurred. Do children become aware of the potential connections between what they read

and what they write? How do they learn to read like writers and use what they have observed in their reading to make conscious choices in their writing? Where do they acquire the information on which they base their decisions as authors?

As a reading specialist working on my practicum requirement, I decided to explore these questions. My research with a third-grade class is the outcome of a 6-week genre study on fairy tales. My final goal was to have students write their own fairy tales. How would their writing be influenced by the fairy tales they read? This became my organizing question. This article reports my findings of the conscious and unconscious reading connections that these third graders made when they wrote fairy tales.

Background

My beliefs have been particularly influenced by Rosenblatt's transactional theory (1989). As students compose and become active creators of meaning in text, they make conscious and unconscious decisions about incorporating literature into their writing. This transaction is central to the creation of meaning. Moreover, as Atwell (1987), Calkins (1986), Graves (1983), and Hansen (1987) suggest, students involved in a rich writing

curriculum develop a sophisticated sense of authorship and readership. Graves (1989) states that by examining the writing of professionals to see how they work with leads, endings, plots, and character, teachers can open the door to a multidimensional world of detail, incident, and meaning. Children can begin to read an author like a writer.

Cairney (1990), an Australian researcher, further documented reading/writing connections in his two-year study of intertextuality. He defined intertextuality as the "process of interpreting one text by means of a previously composed text" (p. 480). For example, after reading and hearing fairy tales, my students incorporated elements of fairy tales into their writing of them. Their stories, which began with "once upon a time" and ended with "they lived happily ever after," were filled with images of princesses, castles, and magic. They had interpreted one text (their writing) with a previously composed text (the fairy tales they had read). Cairney found that 90% of the 6- to 12-year-old students in his study were aware of intertextual links. Interestingly, he also found that there were only minor differences in awareness of intertextuality among children of different abilities, although a synthesis of several narratives was found more often in high-ability students. I decided to further explore these links as part of my study.

A genre study of fairy tales

In the spring of 1991 I worked with Bob Blue's third-grade class at Schofield Elementary School in suburban Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts. Our 21 third graders were drawn from a heterogeneous and socioeconomically diverse population that included disadvantaged (10%) to upper middle class children whose reading levels ranged from second to sixth grade. This was the school's first year of implementing the Houghton-Mifflin Reading/Language Arts Program (1989), a whole class literature-based reading program consisting of a thematically arranged anthology of literature accompanied by paperback classics. Students were also encouraged to respond to readings with both structured and open-ended responses in a response journal.

Children read, discuss, and write

Twice a week for six weeks, in one-hour blocks, I visited Bob's third-grade class to en-

rich the fairy tale paperback classic. I introduced the unit with a word splash (Figure 1) so I could tap into students' prior knowledge about fairy tales. Working in pairs, students wrote down any connections they could make between the words on the word splash and fairy tales they might have read. Then, after reading "Puss 'n Boots," we discussed its fairy tale elements and made a class list of them. In addition to the four tales in the paperback classic ("Puss 'n Boots," "Hansel and Gretel," "The Golden Bird," and "Snow White"), I brought to class three or four variants of "Cinderella," "Beauty and the Beast," "Goldilocks," "Red Riding Hood," "Sleeping Beauty," and "Jack and the Beanstalk." During each of my visits, students were encouraged to compare and contrast the fairy tales they read and heard. We compared illustrations, names of characters, settings, the actual events (plot), and endings. Thus, through class discussion, reading, and chart making, third graders constantly examined the elements of fairy tales. Simultaneously, we worked on a magical kingdom mural. Students worked in groups to create castles, royal families, horse-drawn carriages, ogres, villages, animals, and magic beanstalks. We thus created a fairy tale environment in our classroom.

After four weeks of studying fairy tales I asked students to write one. As a prewriting activity, we created a map to examine the story structure of "Jack and the Beanstalk." This then served as the students' model for planning their own fairy tales. While students were encouraged to incorporate elements of fairy tales into their writing, I did not suggest that they use specific book language or sentence structure. During each successive visit, Bob and I conferred with students and students conferred with each other in writing response groups. Bob ultimately published the final drafts in a class anthology.

The study

After students had written their fairy tales, I decided to ask them questions about their writing. I wanted to find out if students were consciously incorporating specific fairy tale elements into their stories. I also wondered if students were incorporating elements of any other stories they had read into their writing, so I asked them to fill out a questionnaire containing the following five questions:

Figure 1
Fairy tale word splash

once upon a time
happily ever after
Grimm wedding birth
Perrault
princess enchanted forest death
prince witch
king
cleverness Queen
ogre
beginning middle Knight
curse feast end mirror
spell good evil
bravery
wisdom plot
courage magic fairy godmother
seven wishes kindness
three
stepmother kingdom

(1) Did you think of specific stories when you were writing your fairy tale? (2) Give me an example. What was the name of the story you remember? (3) What details in your story were like other stories you remember? (4) Were your characters like other characters you had read about? (5) Did your story end like it in any way?

In addition, I examined each of the stories for fairy tale elements and language. To corroborate my findings, I asked another reading specialist to independently read the students' fairy tales. When she analyzed the stories, she found similar evidence of fairy tale elements and book language.

Student responses to the questionnaire: Conscious intertextual links. Of the 18 students who responded to the questionnaire, 11 students (61%) said they had made conscious connections to stories they had read, although only 7 children could cite specific stories. "Sleeping Beauty," "Rose Red," "Snow White," "Beauty and the Beast," "Cinderella," "Vasilissa, the Wise," *Miss Rumphius*, *Peter and the Wolf*, and *Call of the Wild* were mentioned. Seven children modeled their characters after those in stories they had read; four students specifically named fairy tale characters such as Cinderella, dwarfs, and the beast. Moreover, three students made connections not only to fairy tale characters, but to characters from other stories they had read: *Miss Rumphius* (Cooney, 1982), *Peter and the Wolf* (Mikolaycak, 1982), *Call of the Wild* (London, 1903), and *White Fang* (London, 1933). For example, Abby wrote on her questionnaire: "Samantha is the name of the woman in my story and she planted flowers and so did Miss Rumphius so that makes them the same. She lived by the water and so did Samantha."

Four children synthesized several stories by combining "Beauty and the Beast" and "Cinderella"; "Sleeping Beauty," "Rose Red," and "Snow White"; "Sleeping Beauty" and "Vasilissa, the Wise"; and *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*. Nine students incorporated specific details into their stories such as "a spell broken on a prince" and a poor family. Andrew listed details of "a castle, feast, magic kiss, and a glass hill" on his questionnaire. He clarified the glass hill by saying that he had seen this detail on television. Apparently Andrew had filed away this literary detail in his subconscious; when he was composing he

pulled out this information because it fit his particular story.

I was most surprised that only three students stated that they had used fairy tale endings. For example, Kim responded: "Yes, Anna married a prince who had a spell put on him like beauty and the beast." It appears from this answer that children were looking for very specific comparisons rather than the generic happy endings of fairy tales.

Beyond the questionnaire: My discoveries. One of the most interesting findings was that four students were able to synthesize several fairy tales into their writing. For example, Kim wrote on her questionnaire: "They were poor and Anna's mother was mean like Cinderella. Also, Anna was nice to the prince and

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she broke a spell that was on him like Beauty and The Beast." Kim consciously chose details from these two tales to weave into her own story. When I examined Kim's story (Figure 2), I noticed many fairy tale elements. For example, the beginning was very reminiscent of "Cinderella": "Anna's mother was very mean to her. She made Anna do all the work, and gave her a single piece of bread for supper." As her character, Anna, discovered a castle, Kim switched to details from "Beauty and the Beast." Kim wrote: "Anna peeked in a door where she found a feast taking place. At the table was an ugly man, and next to him, an ugly woman. They must be ogres, thought Anna." As Kim developed her story, she used a magic blanket to transform a poor man in rags into a prince:

At that very moment, the room turned into a big, fancy room, and the man had on magnificent finery. Anna looked out the door and saw that the ogres had turned into servants. The man was a prince, and Anna had broken the spell that a magic sparrow had put on him for stealing carrots.

Figure 2
Kim's story

Once upon a time, long, long ago, in a small village, there was a girl named Anna. Anna and her mother were pretty poor. Anna's mother was very mean to her. She made Anna do all the work, and gave her a single piece of bread for supper. One day Anna was walking in the forest to get away from all the chores and cruelty when she saw a path. Anna thought she knew every inch of the forest, but she had never seen this before. She followed the path, and then, right there at the edge of the forest, she saw a beautiful castle. She went closer and closer. It got more and more beautiful. She went to the door. It was ajar, so Anna slipped in. She tiptoed around. Anna peeked in a door where she found a feast taking place. At the table was an ugly man, and next to him, an ugly woman. They must be ogres, thought Anna. Over in the corner, all in rags, and eating bread and water off an old table, was a handsome man. Anna was going to look around more, but just then the ogres finished. Anne tiptoed quickly to the door and left. The next day, Anna got up early and quietly slipped out of the house. When she got to the castle, Anna opened the door just enough to slide through. She quietly walked down the hall, peeking in doors. But she didn't see anyone. Finally she came to a small, worn-out door. She looked inside and saw the handsome young man sleeping on the floor with a thin sheet in a room about as big as an over-sized closet. Anna felt sorry for him. She had a bad home, too, but he was like a prisoner. Anna ran home to her kitchen. She got some soup (though there wasn't much) and some bread. Then she went to her room and pulled the warmest blanket she had off her mattress. She hurried to the castle. She went to the man's room. She gave him the soup and bread. Then she put the blanket on him. At that very moment, the room turned into a big, fancy room, and the man had on magnificent finery. Anna looked out the door and saw that the ogres had turned to servants. The man was a prince, and Anna had broken the spell that a magic sparrow had put on him for stealing carrots. Anna stayed at the castle that night, for now the prince was feeling sorry for her. The next day, the prince asked Anna to marry him. Anna accepted, and the wedding was held the very same day. And Anna and the prince lived happily ever after.

—Kim

Clearly, Kim had borrowed many details from "Beauty and the Beast" (ogres, feast, magic spell), but she had made them her own by making slight variations on the specifics. She had used her depository of literary details to create her own unique story.

Ollie, a voracious reader, incorporated ideas, language, and setting from *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* into a unique fairy tale (Figure 3). His story began: "Long, long ago, deep in a forest, there lived an Indian warrior. One day the Indian warrior, whose name was Tatsu, was walking in the woods." As Ollie developed his story, Tatsu saved a wolf from being killed. The wolf then granted him three wishes. The Indian only wanted one wish and that was to keep the wolf as a pet. And so, the story ended: "The wolf granted his wish, and they lived a long and happy life together." Ollie incorporated his love of wolves with the magic of fairy tales to create his own unique synthesis.

A third student, Gussie, stated on her questionnaire that she borrowed from three stories: "Sleeping Beauty," "Rose Red," and "Snow White." When I examined her story

(Figure 4), I noticed that she had incorporated the magic number three, a witch, a handsome prince, and a beautiful daughter. As her story unfolded, she wrote convincingly in the language of fairy tales:

Weeks passed. Then the girl found out three things: 1. That the fake grandmother was the witch, 2. There was a prince captured with her, and 3. That if she found a pearl necklace, the prince would be free. Now she loved him, so she risked her life for him. The next day she found the pearls and spun them around three times. The prince appeared and lived happily ever after with the beautiful Alyssa.

Each of these three students achieved a unique blending of stories in their writing as they borrowed from stories they had read. I agree with Cairney that synthesis is probably the most sophisticated incorporation of literature into writing. However, I noticed that students unconsciously synthesize stories. Additionally, in writing response groups, students noticed this synthesis in their classmates' writing. Audrey, a special needs student, declared: "Andrew, your story sounds like 'Sleeping Beauty,' 'Vasilissa the Wise,' and 'Snow White!'"

The language of fairy tales: Unconscious intertextual links. In contrast to the story elements of fairy tales which I specifically discussed with my students, the language of fairy tales—the complex sentence structure and the musicality of the words—were not the focal points of my teaching. Thus, I was very interested in examining their stories for the language of fairy tales. I surmised that students had unconsciously stored away the rhythm and cadence of fairy tale language into their repertoire of literary knowledge. I was interested in exploring not only what children learned through language, but what children learned about and of language (Halliday, 1975; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984). I discovered that all of the students, to a greater or lesser extent, had internalized the cadences, rhythms, and particular phrases characteristic of fairy tales. For example, Gussie used descriptive phrases and metaphors in her writing:

Alyssa was a beautiful child, with eyes that shone like sapphires, and hair like gold. The house was always gay and merry, but one place, the kitchen, was dark and gloomy, because of the servants that worked for the family.

Another student, Laura, wrote: “All the doctors and nurses, her mother the queen, and her father the king called her Brown Hair, Brown Eyes. For she had brown hair and brown eyes.” Modeling her story on “Rapunzel,” Laura had varied her story by granting the king and queen three wishes so that her character could once again have “normal” hair. She ended her story: “The king and queen rejoiced. They were contented. The issue is solved so my tale is done.” I was struck foremost by the unusual sophistication of this 9-year-old’s language and sentence construction. She had assimilated not only the details of fairy tales to delineate and describe her characters but also the musical language of fairy tales.

A third student, Gwen, used dialogue and magic to move her plot forward. I was struck by her use of complex sentence structure and the poetic consonance of her language. She wrote: “One day Cara asked her mother and father if she could go out of the woods to the world beyond. ‘NO! Certainly not!’ said her parents. Cara didn’t understand why, so she found a crow and kept sending him to the world beyond to tell her what he saw.” Cara

Figure 3
Ollie’s story

Long, long ago, deep in a forest, there lived an Indian warrior. One day the Indian warrior, whose name was Tatsu, was walking in the woods. He heard a growl and a snarl. Startled, Tatsu grabbed his bow and pulled an arrow from his quiver. He ran towards the din. When the Indian got there, he found a man stabbing a wolf with a knife. Tatsu quickly pulled out his spear and threw it at the man. The spear pierced the man in the heart. The man suddenly froze and ripped out the spear from his back. He broke it in half and hurled the pieces into the woods. The man took his sword out of its sheath and charged Tatsu. Tatsu dodged the sword and kicked the man in the stomach. He flipped the man over and poured poison into his wound. Tatsu took his bow and arrow and shot an arrow into the wound. The poison began to hurt the man, and he fell limply on to the ground. The wolf saw that his enemy was dead, and said to the Indian, “You have saved my life. I owe you my life. You may have three wishes.”

The Indian said, “I would like you as my pet, and that is all.” The wolf granted his wish, and they lived a long and happy life together.

—Ollie

Figure 4
Gussie’s story

In a little village by the sea, there lived a mother and father and their daughter, Alyssa. Alyssa was a beautiful child, with eyes that shone like sapphires, and hair like gold. The house was always gay and merry, but one place, the kitchen, was dark and gloomy, because of the servants that worked for the family. A year later, when the family was at supper, the mother started getting pale when she ate her meat, then she fell to the ground screaming, “Help! Help!” There was silence. The mother had died. A few months after the funeral, the little girl went to her bedroom to cry. The next morning she was feeling dizzy. Her bedroom was different. She was on a ship. How wonderful for her! She called for her father, but he was nowhere in sight. On the ship it was 17 years later. A lady appeared in a blue cloak and a white blouse and black skirt. The old lady said not to be scared—that she was her grandmother. But she was really a witch. Weeks passed. Then the girl found out three things: 1. That the fake grandmother was a witch, 2. There was a prince captured with her, and 3. That if she found a pearl necklace, the prince would be free. Now she loved him, so she risked her life for him. The next day she found the pearls and spun them around three times. The prince appeared and lived happily ever after with the beautiful Alyssa.

—Gussie

eventually ran away, but three days later she realized something. Gwen wrote: "She missed home! Cara thought about her chats with the chipmunks, and the bears she would ride in the forest, and she thought about the tales the storyteller told in a circle around the crackling fire, but most of all, she missed her parents!"

All of these third graders were expert language users; they had assimilated fairy tales and both consciously and unconsciously had transferred their literary knowledge into their own stories. Like De Ford (1981) and Eckhoff (1983), I found that students' writing reflected the particular language of the genre they were reading. Moreover, their writing was filled with complex sentence structures when they were reading literature.

More unconscious intertextual links. Hypothesizing that students often unconsciously write from their literary backgrounds, I analyzed the stories of the seven respondents who answered that they did not think of specific

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stories when they wrote their fairy tales. I discovered fairy tale elements in all of their stories. What was most striking to me, in particular, was the variety of the leads. They all began with a variation of "once upon a time," or "long, long, long ago." Andrew S.'s story began: "Once in a far away town beyond the Japanese American border in the middle of the ocean lies an island called Waterian Ocean Island." Reuben's story began: "Once upon a time in a kingdom called New York City, there lived a young handsome boy."

Six of these students also had incorporated magic or other details, such as children lost in the woods. Daniel wrote about giants and knights and ended with a celebration. Molly wrote about a magical fairy that could fly; Tracy incorporated a magic fork; and

Keisuke wrote of a magical birth. These students had internalized the language and details of fairy tales but were not consciously aware of making the connections. Interestingly, these same students would be the ones that might be grouped as low-ability readers. I found, then, that all of the students had made intertextual links. However, high-ability students tended to make conscious connections while low-ability students seemed to make unconscious connections.

Conclusions

From my limited survey I have concluded that students do indeed make intertextual links. Even students who were not conscious of the details in their writing incorporated elements of fairy tales into their stories. To me, what was most striking was the ability of students to name specific stories as well as the characters and details that they drew from them. Also striking was the ability of students to internalize the rhythm, cadence, and sentence structure of fairy tales into their repertoire of language.

It is important, however, to note that these students had been immersed in a literature study of fairy tales. As their teacher, I made specific connections to the elements of fairy tales when we read the stories. I think it is crucial for teachers to point out elements of writing as students read literature. As students read folktales, fiction, poetry, plays, or non-fiction, it is important that teachers highlight each genre's particular writing style. Only then will students maximize their ability to transfer literary details into their own writing. Secondly, students need to be reading and hearing literature beyond their assigned reading program. As I have confirmed, children are able to draw upon multiple texts when they are writing stories. They are consciously and unconsciously absorbing the literary details of the stories they read, and they are using these stories as models when they write. Clearly, literature is an essential resource for the teaching of writing (Skolnick, 1989). Immersing my third graders in a study of fairy tales provided them with a new lens for seeing the world and for writing (Wilde, 1985).

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